TRUTH

26

Experience Counts!
Not Necessarily!
Most of us accept the common sense notion that experience is a valuable, even necessary, component for effective leadership. Voters, for instance, tend to believe that the jobs of U.S. senator or state governor prepare individuals to be effective U.S. presidents. Similarly, organizations buy into this notion when they carefully screen outside candidates for senior management positions on the basis of their experience. For that matter, have you ever filled out an employment application that didn’t ask about previous experience or job history? In many instances, experience is used as the single most important factor in hiring and promotion decisions. Well, here’s the surprising news: The evidence doesn’t support that experience per se contributes to leadership effectiveness.

"Some inexperienced leaders have been outstandingly successful, while many experienced leaders have been outstanding failures. Among the most highly regarded former presidents are Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman, who had very little previous leadership, while highly experienced Herbert Hoover and Franklin Pierce were among the least successful." Studies of military officers, research and development teams, shop supervisors, post office administrators, and school principals tell us that experienced managers tend to be no more effective than the managers with little experience.

There is no shortage of corporate examples demonstrating the failure of prior leadership experience to predict future performance. For instance, John Sculley was successful as president of PepsiCo but a disappointment as CEO at Apple. Ron Johnson, who was a star when he ran Apple’s retail operations, bombed as CEO at JCPenney. And Carly Fiorina found that her successes at Lucent didn’t transfer when she took over the CEO position at Hewlett Packard.

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How could it be that experience wouldn’t make leaders more effective? Intuitively, it would seem that experience would provide
learning opportunities that would translate into improved on-the-job leadership skills. The problems seem to be twofold. First, quality of experience and time in the job are not necessarily the same thing. Second, variability between situations influences the transferability of experience.

One flaw in the “experience counts” logic is the assumption that length of time in a job is actually a measure of experience. This says nothing about the quality of experience. The fact that one person has 20 years’ experience while another has 2 years’ doesn’t necessarily mean that the former has had ten times as many meaningful experiences. Too often, 20 years of experience is nothing other than 1 year of experience repeated 20 times! In even the most complex jobs, real learning typically ends after 2 or 3 years. By then, almost all new and unique situations have been experienced. So one problem with trying to link experience with leadership effectiveness is not paying attention to the quality and diversity of the experience.

The second problem is the situations in which experience is obtained are rarely comparable to new situations. It’s critical to take into consideration the relevance of past experience to a new situation. Jobs differ, support resources differ, organizational cultures differ, follower characteristics differ, and so on. A primary reason that leadership experience isn’t strongly related to leadership performance is undoubtedly due to variability of situations.

So what can we conclude? When selecting people for leadership positions, be careful not to place too much emphasis on their experience. Experience, per se, is not a good predictor of effectiveness. Just because a candidate has ten years of previous leadership experience is no assurance that his or her experience will transfer to a new situation. What is relevant is the quality of previous experience and the relevance of that experience to the new situation that the leader will face. Too often, 20 years of experience is nothing other than 1 year of experience repeated 20 times!